

# SOCIALITY AND IMMEDIACY: OR, PAST AND PRESENT CONVERSATIONS ON BANDS

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This article offers a fresh account of the social organization of hunter-gatherers, challenging the ecological framework which has dominated hunter-gatherer studies to date. It re-visits the conversation on 'band societies', which was started by Julian Steward in 1936 and nearly died out thirty years later, after the seminal symposium *Man the Hunter*. It introduces indigenous voices into it, linking them not with ecological but with contemporary theoretical concerns about the diversity of sociality and about society as a concept. The article proposes that band relationships are about ways of relating to others that rest on 'we relationships' and on a 'sharing perspective'. They are expressions of sociality, the general significance of which has hitherto been largely overlooked.

In *Conversations in Colombia* (1990), Gudeman and Rivera suggest that 'conversations' provide a model for anthropological practice. Conversations, they write, are 'a process, a use, and as they are in history and make it, a model' (Gudeman & Rivera 1990: 187). They point out that fieldwork is a perpetual conversation with local peoples, while research and inscription are embedded in long conversations, in which the ethnographers play a part. Furthermore, the strength of anthropological practice lies in listening to voices 'on the ground' and 'in the air', from the past and from texts. One of anthropology's main purposes is to bring these voices, and different conversations in space and history, 'to the bar of discussion' (1990: 191).

In this article, I want to restart a long conversation that nearly died out; a conversation about the 'band society', where families are not dominated by larger organizational structures but are themselves the locus of socio-political and economic practices. This conversation was started by Julian Steward in his article 'The economic and social basis of primitive bands' (1936). It was continued by Elman Service (1962), then by the contributors to the 1965 conference on *Band societies* (Damas 1969), and then, again, by Service in *The hunters* (1966) – this time around, freed from the 1930s' evolutionary tether. Following the 1967 symposium *Man the hunter*, however, mainstream conversation largely turned to the 'hunting and gathering mode of subsistence', becoming evolutionary-driven all over again. The conversation on 'bands'

almost died out, with the few remaining voices intermittent and faint (e.g., Peterson 1986; Myers 1988).

A quarter-of-a-century later, it is time to pick up and renew the 1960s' conversation on bands. Exploding into fierce controversies, its successor, the conversation on 'subsistence', seems to have reached a turning point, if not an end (e.g., Wilmsen 1989; Solway & Lee 1990; Wilmsen & Denbow 1991; Lee & Guenther 1991). Furthermore, current discussions on the diversity of sociality, and 'society' and 'person' as cultural concepts, provide both an impetus and new conceptual contexts for the discussion of bands (e.g., Carrithers 1992; Goody in press; Kuper 1992; Strathern 1988; Wolf 1982).<sup>1</sup> Finally, recent research speaks for it in showing that the band formation often persists while subsistence activities undergo diversification (see Bird-David 1983; Guenther 1986; Kent forthcoming; Peterson & Matsuyama 1991; Sansom 1980).

The thrust of the present attempt to renew the conversation on bands lies in drawing the indigenous voices into it, for throughout the conversation on 'bands', the voices of hunting and gathering peoples themselves were barely audible. Neither their own conversations, nor anthropologists' conversations with them, were clearly 'brought to the bar of discussion'. The article draws on fieldwork (1978-9, 1989) among the Nayaka, a forest-dwelling group of the Nilgiri-Wynaad in south India, paying attention to what *they* 'say' through words, silences and activities about relationships, making relationships, and 'society'. On the latter, an issue of – and for – comparison (see Kuper 1992), it turns briefly also to studies of desert Australia Pintupi (Myers 1986), Belcher Island Inuit (Guemple 1988) and, for contrast, Melanesian peoples (Strathern 1992). After Strathern (1988), these are comparisons between cultures set not within a grand scheme, but against each other, for mutual insight (cf. Bird-David in press).

The article starts by examining the early development of the conversation on 'bands' and its subsequent misadventures. It then suggests how an emergent concern with 'sociality' invites the rehabilitation of this conversation. The article then turns to the indigenous people themselves, proposing that their band relationships are about ways of relating to others that rest on immediacy and sharing. These ways are specific expressions of a universal capacity for sociality, about which band peoples elaborate, weaving structures of 'we relationships' and 'shared perspectives'.

### *Band and ecology*

It is often suggested that modern hunter-gatherer studies started during the 1967 conference *Man the hunter* with the 'demise' of the early comparative conversation on bands (e.g., Barnard 1983). According to the conventional story, the early period of the conversation – a kind of 'dark age' – was dominated by the 'Steward-Service typology'. This identified three types of bands: patrilineal (which Service later called patrilocal), composite and matrilineal; the first being the common form, with the other two being aberrant forms

caused by diverse circumstances. This typology reigned for thirty years. Its moment of truth came when 'young' anthropologists went into the field and reported that 'they failed to find this [the patrilocal] form of organization operating now or at any discoverable period in the past' (Lee & DeVore 1968: 8). Convening in the symposium *Man the hunter*, these anthropologists concluded that 'on the basis of present evidence it appears that the patrilocal band is certainly not the universal form of hunter group structure that Service thought it was' (Lee & DeVore 1968: 8).

This story, I argue, misrepresents the conversation on bands, and constitutes a sort of origin myth – or a straw man – for the conversation on 'subsistence'. Furthermore, it concentrates on the problematic detail rather than on Steward's substantial and genuine achievement. Steward was concerned first and foremost with what he called 'levels of socio-cultural integration'. The 'band' for him was the simplest aggregate of families connected by kinship ties; or, as he later expressed it, 'a number of families which associate and interact with each other on a permanent basis' (1969: 188). He distinguished it from the tribe's segmentary system; a progressively inclusive series of groups from the domestic unit to the encompassing tribal whole (see Sahlins 1968). It later turned out that Steward was wrong in thinking that the basis was permanent, but this was the detail; the main gist of his contribution was a problematization of band social life in terms of its familial structure. It was precisely this point which Service sharpened in *The hunters* (1966), a book used by teachers but little noticed by researchers. He argued that the entire society is nothing but families, loosely integrated through real or fictive kinship ties. Each band is usually a vague entity without very definite boundaries; the family is often the only consistent face-to-face group. Service characterized these societies by the term 'familism', and proceeded to explore the nature of familistic economy, familistic society, familistic polity and familistic culture.

Back in 1936, however, Steward was caught in a thicket of typological discrimination and definition. He was still responding to late nineteenth-century voices, entering a conversation about the 'most ancient human institutions'. Morgan had argued that this institution was the matrilineal family; his opponents had suggested the bilateral family; and Steward had tried to make the point that it was the patrilineal clan (1936: 331). He was concerned with clans in general, and focused on hunting and gathering peoples for methodological reasons because they constituted, so he thought, the simplest examples (1936: 331). Then, like many technologically minded Westerners, he was gripped by the simple technical means by which – as far as he knew then – they procured their means of livelihood. Despite his overall concern with 'socio-cultural integration', he presumed that *their* culture was simple, and 'extensively patterned by subsistence activities' (1938: 1). He went on to explain bands as an outcome of this mode of subsistence, drawing on comparisons with animal foraging and socio-territorial organization. It is on account of this 'animalization' and the heavy pressure of

technoecological determinism that the conversation on 'subsistence' later traced its origin to Steward's work (see Peterson 1986).

However, by the 1965 symposium on *Band societies* convened by David Damas, Steward was already urging the need to keep away from 'a search for criteria of bands', 'a construction of a typology of bands', and 'a *a priori* reification of the concept' – all 'in favour of "case-by-case cross-cultural study"' (1969: 186, 190). The participants followed the agenda, considering not band typology but what actually happens within bands: how individuals interact and co-operate with each other, and how they relate to the band at large. They showed that in most of the societies discussed there is no formal authority; and individuals enjoyed a great deal of autonomy, having freedom of choice in most of what they do. They did not go far enough, I think, for three reasons. First, they were concerned primarily with the kinship anatomy of residential patterns. Secondly, they presumed 'classic' kinship relationships – as in other kinds of societies – without questioning whether kinship among hunter-gatherers is generically different (which I shall argue it is). Finally, they sought functional explanations for the kinship-based residential patterns. Deep down, they were still tuned to Steward's earlier dialogue with nineteenth-century voices.

A major change was introduced by Service in *The hunters* (1966). He referred to a typology of bands but (*contra* the conventional view of his work) addressed it in only 4 of the 111 pages of his book, and barely touched on it in the appended case-notes, now radically different from those apparently similar ones which had appeared in Steward's 1936 work. Furthermore, despite the title of his book, he was little concerned with 'hunting and gathering'. Even the index sends the reader to only two pages, 11-12, in marked difference from later 'subsistence' texts (e.g., Lee 1979). Moreover, departing from the strong evolutionism of Steward's work, he compared band societies not with what Adam Kuper has called 'the invention of the primitive society' (1988) but with Western modern societies. Characterizing band societies by familism, he argued that familistic structures are found in all contemporary societies, although often dominated by more complex structures.

The symposium *Man the hunter* could have further advanced the conversation. As Murdock observed, comparing the twenty-seven ethnographic papers presented there, it showed that apart from the complicated Australian groups, 'the nuclear family is less frequently swamped by large types of family organization ... than elsewhere' (Murdock 1968: 335). At the same time, it showed a bewildering variety of subsistence forms, so much so that Irvine DeVore, who co-initiated the conference with Richard Lee, concluded that 'to the extent that we can still see the forest despite the trees, it is ... a very lush, variegated, tropical rain forest' (DeVore 1968: 339). Participants recognized the small band structure as a 'central tendency', which they tried to explain by 'subsistence' logic, but as even they were only too ready to admit, they 'failed to arrive at any satisfactory explanation for this central

tendency' (Lee & DeVore 1968: 11). These issues may all seem to suggest a gathering momentum for the further exploration of the conversation on bands. Yet, the thrust of hunter-gatherer research shifted instead towards the 'hunting and gathering mode of subsistence' (and later, under the 1970s' Marxist influence, to 'the hunting and gathering mode of production').

This curious phenomenon repeated itself in subsequent years. In 1975, for example, Burch called for a comparative study of 'family-oriented societies'; 'surely', he pleaded, 'this type of system is worthy of greater anthropological attention than it has received in the past' (Burch 1975: 295). He reiterated Service's hypothesis about the pervasiveness of this system (Burch 1975: 301). Yet his plea fell on deaf ears, just as Service's earlier attempt had done. Ethnographers continued to report on 'band' themes, such as 'autonomy', 'equality' and 'flux', on how pivotal they were for understanding these populations (e.g., Myers 1986; Bird-David 1987), and on how common they were among them (Gardner 1966; Woodburn 1982). Ecologically-oriented theoreticians tried to harness these observations to the mainstream subsistence conversation, and, failing, left them behind.<sup>2</sup> In a recent article, Gardner (1991) lists a dozen theoretical formulations of this kind.

Given all these factors, why did the focus of the conversation shift from 'band' towards 'mode of subsistence' and stick there for so long? The reasons are complex. It would take a full ethnographic study to provide a reasonable understanding by examining (among other things) the history and organization of the community of ethnographers, and the core images and discursive issues of Western culture and its product, Anthropology. While such a comprehensive study must be left for another time, one factor is directly relevant to the present argument. It is that until recently the dominant Western account of evolution focused on the development of technology in response to pressures of the physical environment. This evolutionist narrative has provided neither the stimulus nor the potential audience for serious thinking about band sociality. But this narrative is changing now, and the new story (which I shall examine next) calls for thinking about hunter-gatherers' sociality, and more generally, for the renewal of the conversation on bands.

### *Band and sociality*

There is a growing concern about the causal role of sociality in human evolution, so much so that in some accounts the pendulum has fully swung from technology to sociality, no doubt reflecting the Western dualistic separation between the two, which pushes one to think about the one or the other (Ingold 1993). The change was inspired by a suggestive idea, sketched out in the 1970s by psychologist and ethologist Nick Humphrey (1976; cf. Jolly 1966). Humphrey speculated that social skills and intellect co-evolved and are mutually constituted; furthermore, that this social intelligence was pivotal in humans' later evolution. His idea was taken up by ethologists Richard Byrne and Andrew Whiten, who, joined by others, pursued it empirically (Byrne & Whiten 1988). They found among social primates a

surprisingly sophisticated social behaviour, and potentially high technical abilities not put to use simply because social skills were more rewarding for successful survival.

Inasmuch as one can judge from contemporary phenomena, their findings supported Humphrey's shift of emphasis from technology to social intelligence, the implications of which are now also being explored by social anthropologists (e.g., Carrithers 1992; Goody in press; Ingold & Gibson 1993). For example, in *Why humans have cultures* (1992) – a book which, much like Service's *The hunters* introduces a new argument within the context of an introductory text-book – Carrithers identifies social intelligence with the much-talked about sociality. He provisionally defines sociality as 'a capacity for complex social behaviour' (Carrithers 1992: 34). He then further elaborates:

Sociality is an inherited trait or traits expressed in individual organisms, attributable ultimately to the frequencies of genes in the population of which they are members. Sociality is established through the force of natural selection on that population (1992: 38).

And later:

Sociality is a capacity, a potential. It can only be realized by conception, birth, maturation, and growth in a suitable environment. The genes themselves are only a part of the process ... they comprise not so much a blueprint of how an organism must look as a list of potentials that an organism might have. Their potentials may be differently expressed in different environments (1992: 40).

Carrithers conjectures that such sociality evolved through an 'evolutionary ratchet' because its consequences – more complex social arrangements – became selective forces in themselves (1992: 48). Thus, humans slowly wove their own societies, making collective life more and more intricate, favouring more and more socially adept players, eventually producing the vast social diversity and creativity we have come to know now. 'Human life is causal', Carrithers concludes, 'and it is relations between humans which form the causation' (1992: 30).

This approach aligns itself with a perspective, which already plays a leading role in contemporary social theory, best presented in Wolf's *Europe and the peoples without history* (1982). Showing that populations, long held to be separate, are all, down to the very last, historically interconnected and mutually constituted, Wolf conceptualizes the human world (since 1400) as a system of relationships which 'empower human action, inform it, and are carried forward by it' (1982: 386). Carrithers's argument, in effect, extends this perspective down to the fine grain of individual relationships and (through reasonable conjecture) back to the beginning of human evolution.

In passing, it is worth mentioning that this emergent narrative harmonizes with recent work in the sociology of technology which shows that technological innovations in the modern context often do not simply shape but are shaped by webs of social and economic relationships (e.g., MacKenzie & Wajcman 1985). This message finds resonances in Carrithers's argument that, historically and evolutionarily, technology itself has been transmitted in

social context, and works itself through human relationships, which themselves constitute a distinctive level of causality (1992: 31).

'Sociality' has certainly become a 'voice in the air', which finds its way to many diverse areas of work. Unfortunately, it is also used as a buzz-word – too much and too elliptically. Carrithers gives an exceptionally clear definition of how it can be read, but even he leaves unclear the differences and the articulation between sociality, social relationships, society and (social) environment. We can follow his lead and say that humans – with their capacity for sociality which, however, they realize in different social environments – weave diverse webs of social relationships. Some of these webs are long-distance webs that encompass local webs; others are local webs that closely engage with the webs of neighbours. Ultimately, as Wolf (1982) shows, all the webs, near and far, are articulated into one global system. These humans think and reflect on the webs they cumulatively weave: 'society' is how they conceptualize it, variably from group to group. This 'society' itself is part of the 'environment' in which they learn – and are encultured – to realize in diverse ways their common capacity for sociality.

Now, this formulation of 'environment', I think, is nothing but a mature, sophisticated, less totalizing re-formulation of what Steward's 'level of socio-cultural integration' had come to be by the 1960s. This formulation, therefore, invites and facilitates a renewal of Steward's conversation on bands, which this time around, however, must persevere with its focus on sociality and steer clear of any shift to ecology under the illusion of simple animal-like indigenous existence, doubly wrong because even high primates seem to have complex social systems. The conversation must also steer clear of any insinuation that these indigenous populations are linked to early humans through shorter time spans than ourselves. Moreover, it should concern itself with the relationships they weave not only among themselves but also with other peoples, local and Euro-American. The latter, however, must necessarily be done by stages. It is Wolf himself who cautions us, positing (in Carrithers's words) that

it is important to disassemble the global dynamic system and see how individual 'societies' or 'cultures' work ... [then] this step of disassembly must be followed by reassembly (Carrithers 1992: 27).

In the aftermath of thirty years' conversation on 'subsistence', we do not know even how hunter-gatherer 'societies' and 'cultures' work. The first step is yet to be taken. In its endeavour to restart 'band' conversation, the remainder of this article, therefore, restricts itself to intra-band relationships, and leaves for other papers a discussion of inter- and extra-band relationships (the latter to include intra-band mediated by extra-band relationships). Committed to dialogue with indigenous voices, it turns for that to local conversations with the Nayaka, a forest-dwelling people in the Nilgiri Hills of south India. By no stretch of the imagination do the Nayaka represent a 'standard' band people; nothing like that exists in the real historical world. They simply help the working out of a starting-off idea for a renewed

conversation that, no doubt, will continue to change if, and as, this conversation unfolds.

### *Immediacy*

I worked among a local Nayaka group, who lived in a relatively isolated valley, largely covered by an evergreen and bamboo forest. About a fifth of the valley had been cleared at the beginning of this century, planted by rubber and coffee, and run since by a Keralite merchant as a marginal, barely viable commercial plantation. The Nayaka in this valley numbered (in 1978) 69 individuals – 22 men, 24 women, and 23 children. They were extensively inter-married: about two-thirds of the adults were locally born. They occupied five sites (hamlets, hereafter) at a distance of two to ten kms from each other. The largest of the sites, in which I lived, comprised five huts, the others between one to three huts. There was a constant movement between the hamlets as Nayaka frequently visited each other, each visit lasting from several days up to several months. At the same time – this perhaps distinguishes Nayaka from other band peoples, making them a simple case to examine – they had little contact with Nayaka living outside this valley (henceforth the Gir valley). Except for Nayaka living within a day's walking distance from the Gir valley, and young persons who, unsuccessful in amorous pursuits, went visiting unusually far, they even rarely visited the few Nayaka who had left the valley and settled elsewhere. These 'emigrants', in turn, rarely came back for visits.

The Nayaka in the Gir valley – at this starting point of the ethnographic argument I move to the ethnographic present – conduct their lives within an undivided space and time. The huts (in each of these hamlets) are in close proximity, at a distance of 2-5 metres from each other. Their walls are made of interwoven strips of bamboo, barely offering privacy. People sometimes move into huts whose walls are not yet completed, or where they are dilapidated and not yet repaired, and live there for many weeks in open view before they start to construct walls. Others add extensions to existing huts, so that two or three domestic units live within the same hut, in small living spaces, hardly partitioned. These additions are often constructed by young people as they start to live with spouses, or by single relatives who come as visitors and then stay on. However, others can take their place, if these additions are later vacated, who need not be related in any special way to those living there already. Throughout the dry season (in this local monsoon climate), people in any case spend a great deal of time outside their huts, at their leisure, eating and sleeping by the sides of small fireplaces, a few metres apart from each other.

Except for intimate communication between spouses, who spend most of the day-time as well as night-time together, the interaction between almost any two Nayaka in the hamlet is usually overheard and witnessed by others. Normally, they do not even try to keep their conversations private. They remain sited by their respective fire-places, and talk across space from fire to



fire. Similarly, they rarely try to conceal their domestic activities; for example, they normally go bathing in a nearby river, at the same stretch of water, more or less at the same early and late hours of the day.<sup>3</sup> They rarely gossip – even to this ever-urging anthropologist always eager to hear gossip (cf. Gardner 1966: 398). I think (and it will later become clearer why) that this is because they know each other so well. In a sense, they ‘grow old together’, getting to know each other’s biography, personality, habits and idiosyncrasies, and experiencing for themselves most of what happens in the hamlet.

Occasionally, people gather, passing time together. Normally, they sit all facing the same direction, at some distance from each other, talking about the common view (e.g., commenting on a flower which blossomed over night) or about common impersonal matters (e.g., the fruit season which has just ended). Often, they contribute only silences to the conversation. They do not normally form circles, talking inwards, leaving others outside. Instead, anybody can join the gathering, simply sitting in the same general area, facing the same direction, joining the conversation through words and silences. More generally, normally anybody can join the hamlet, moving into a vacant living space, adding a lean-to to an existing hut, or, in the course of time, building a separate hut.

Such small groups with weak (if any) boundaries characterize many other band peoples (see Lee & DeVore 1968: 8). Ethnographers have glossed this twofold feature by ‘intimacy’ (e.g. Price 1975), or, by its obverse, ‘anonymity’ (e.g., Liberman 1985: 70). However, neither notion adequately captures this conceptually complex situation. Intimacy implies exclusion of others, which is strikingly lacking in this almost boundary-less social environment. Anonymity, on the other hand, is in discord with the deep personal knowledge individuals have of each other in this small group. Instead of these terms, I propose to use the term ‘immediacy’, which was already used by Meillassoux (1973) to describe hunter-gatherers’ relations of production, and by Woodburn (1980) to characterize the socio-economic system of *some* hunter-gatherers – those with immediate-return versus delayed-return systems. (Woodburn also used it to describe other aspects of the former’s way of life, evocatively but without really making explicit what in analytical terms it means there.) I now appropriate the term for this small *and* boundary-less environment (whether among Woodburn’s immediate- or delayed-return societies), leaving its further sociological sense to grow gradually as the analysis progresses.

### *Immediate kinship relationships*

Over the years, through their frequent visits to each other, Nayaka come at some point in their lives to live immediately adjacent to almost every other Nayaka in the Gir valley. Conversely – since they rarely engage with Nayaka outside the valley<sup>4</sup> – they mostly interact with Nayaka with whom they share or have recently shared immediacy. By and large, they therefore live in a universally-immediate Nayaka environment which, I shall argue, is mutually

constituted with their kinship system. The latter is characterized by what Barnard (1981) calls a 'universal kinship system'. Everyone within this community relates to everyone else through kinship links. Furthermore, individuals frequently change the kinship terms they use, tracing connexions through alternative routes.

Certainly, kinship relationships in this community do not form what Bourdieu called an 'official kinship' – a 'coherent system of purely logical relationships, defined once and for all by the implicit axiomatic of a cultural tradition' (1977: 37). Instead, Nayaka often use kinship terms to refer to people when speaking to any Nayaka who, they know, is familiar with the person being talked about – which, in fact, applies to almost every Nayaka in the valley. At the same time, from these kinship practices they learn the terms by which to relate to other Nayaka. Whenever I asked why a particular term was used, I was always given variations on these four basic forms:

- (a) 'I call this person X because he (or she) calls me Y'; for example, 'I [a male] call him *anna(n)* [elder brother] because he calls me '*tamma(n)* [younger brother]'.

Or,

- (b) 'I call this person X, because Y [an older primary kin] calls him or her Z'. For example, 'I call him, say, *cikappa(n)* [junior father, FyB] because my *appa(n)* [father] calls him *tamma(n)* [younger brother]'.

Less frequently, but none the less of a significance to which I shall return later, I was also told:

- (c) 'I call this person Y or, if he or she lives close to us, X, because my spouse calls him or her X'. For example, 'I call her *nadini* [younger sister-in-law] or *tanga* [younger sister], because my woman calls her *tanga* [younger sister]'.

With reference to a few specific terms, especially *maga(n)/maga(l)* (son/daughter), *chikappa(n)/cikawa* (junior father/junior mother), and *dodappa(n)/dodawa* (senior father/senior mother), some Nayaka also said something like:

- (d) 'I call all the children in the hamlet *maga(n)* [son] and *maga(l)* [daughter]; similarly, 'we call all the elder people [apart from primary kin] *cikappa(n)* [junior father] and *cikawa* [junior mother]'; 'we call all the people who died '*dodappa(n)*' [senior father] and '*dodawa*' [senior mother]'.

They concerned themselves, it seems, only with pairs and triads of corresponding kinship terms, emergent and expressed in daily social interaction.<sup>5</sup>

Kinship terms aside, Nayaka sometimes use a few personal names to address and hail other Nayaka; for example, Kungan, Mathen, Kungi, Chathi (the first mentioned two for males, the last mentioned two for females). The same name may be used in reference to a number of persons at once. The names may also change from time to time, a person calling 'X' Mathen for a while may, for example, later start calling him Kungan.<sup>6</sup> This was made only too clear to me at an early stage of my fieldwork, when I did not know better. Going with (the man I called) Kungan – with whose family I lived – to other

hamlets, I asked for names of people there. He called them out, asking 'how were they called now here', then passed their replies to me.

The embeddedness of kinship terms in everyday social practices reinforces the universal immediacy of the Nayaka environment. With no fixed kinship identification and names, even were Nayaka inclined to talk about each other they would have had difficulties talking about persons outside the field of their regular everyday social interaction. In turn, the depth and width of genealogical knowledge seem to reflect on what they learn from the use of kinship terms in immediate interactive contexts. Pursuing genealogical queries with various individuals, they were only ready to go back to the third ascending generation, and skipped, moreover, relatives of second and third ascending generations who died or left the Gir valley when they themselves were very young.<sup>7</sup> They offered a matter-of-fact explanation that they 'did not know them', such relatives 'were no longer there when they grew up'. (When during the first months of fieldwork, I still persisted, they were 'just going to collect firewood' and left.)

Finally, life-cycle events – which in other social environments often demonstrate and re-affirm links between relatives, close and distant, who gather for the celebration – here reinforce immediacy. A marriage, for example, if celebrated at all, involves giving a meal to everyone present, to the exclusion of close relatives if they live in other hamlets. In one extreme instance, a messenger was sent to another hamlet and returned with additional celebrants but not with the boy's father. At that time, the latter was in neither hamlet. Similarly, a burial takes place several hours after death, and is attended by whoever happens to be on site. More generally, mutual help and sharing are underwritten not by kinship ties but by immediacy (cf. Bird-David 1983; 1987).

Altogether, then, it seems that Nayaka dwell in a self-perpetuating immediate environment. This environment is 'overwhelmingly kinship oriented' (Burch 1975: 22). But kinship relationships – and 'society' more generally – seem here to be of a different order, and I turn now to investigate what this order is.

### *Immediate society*

The Nayaka with whom I stayed did not explicitly theorize their 'society' (the reasons for which will be explored below). What follows is my sense of their sense of 'society', worked out by listening to what they 'voice' in their activities, words and silences, and by bringing other local conversations 'to the bar of discussion'. In their conversations, Nayaka make extensive use of the notion *sonta* (family, relatives). It is an ego-centric notion, often used we-centrally by the prefix *nama* (our). It is discursively used in a wide range of contexts to refer to the family, the kindred, the hamlet's residents (at any given point of time), and the aggregate of Nayaka living in the Gir valley (whom the speaker knows through immediate interaction at present or in the closely-remembered past). A few Nayaka go further and apply *sonta* also

to the aggregate of both Nayaka and non-Nayaka with whom they frequently engage. Fewer still – for example, Kungan – go on to describe as *sonta* the entire Nayaka population in the Gir valley and elsewhere, further explaining that these are persons who ‘live with Nayaka, in Nayaka places, like Nayaka’. These usages, especially the two extended ones mentioned last, highlight the importance of place in the making of *sonta*. Indeed, *sime* (home, place) is sometimes used together with, or in place of, *sonta*. It is the spatial concomitant of *sonta* – not a given area of land in terms detached from human activities but, in a dwelling sense, the space in which shared activities take place (cf. Ingold 1986: ch. 6; 1993). From these usages, furthermore, it appears that Nayaka imagine ‘society’ as a series of *sonta* (circles of family, or relatives) nesting within each other.

The terms *walytja* and *ila*, it appears, respectively feature in local conversations of Australian desert Pintupi (Myers 1986) and Belcher Island Inuit (Guemple 1988). According to Myers, drawing on such conversations among and with the former, *walytja* is

the key symbol for the Pintupi social order ... one’s *walytja* includes those with whom one grows up, those who have fed and cared for one, and those with whom one camps frequently... The usual domestic unit of a ‘camp’ including husband, wife, or wives, and small children defines the closest group of *walytja* and the primary food-sharing unit. Beyond this unit are other family camps that may frequently co-reside or reside as parts of the same band. The members of different camps may spend considerable time with each other, sharing meat, looking after small children, feeding them, and lavishing attention on them. ... These people ... are also seen as relatives [*walytja*] (1986: 110).

According to Guemple, drawing on conversations among and with Belcher Island Inuit, *ila* is the root form ‘relative’. To be *ila* is

to be counted a member of the Qiqqtamuit [Belcher Island Inuit]. This category includes all Inuit with whom an individual ordinarily comes into contact on a day-to-day basis and all Inuit who are more or less known to any given reckoner because they have been in contact at one time or another (1988: 132).

In the light of this comparison, *sonta* – and, quite likely, *walytja* and *ila* – appear to be core concepts of an (ethno)sociology that understands ‘to relate’ in a pragmatic sense, as something one does when one shares a place and co-operates with others. This ‘relating’ makes ‘relatives’ – not a pre-given link in a logical template of fixed relationships. As Myers wrote of Pintupi, and it holds true for Nayaka as well, ‘shared activity constituted people as related’ (1986: 92). ‘Relationships are not totally ‘given’ ... [but] must be worked out in a variety of social processes’ (Myers 1986: 159).

Furthermore, this sociology takes family residential practices as its model for larger social aggregates, including society itself. This can be illustrated by the only collective celebration that Nayaka hold every year or so. It is performed on separate occasions in the oldest three of the Gir valley’s five sites. Its organization and activities are structured by this model: the aggregates of celebrants are each described as *sonta*; and the place of the celebration as *sime*. Individuals can join more than one *sonta*. The reckoning is done by local, parental and conjugal connexions – one can join one’s local celebration, the

celebration-*sonta* of either parent, of one's spouse, and of either of the spouse's parents. In effect, however, it is the material contribution to, and participation in, the celebration which counts one in, and no one can be excluded. The celebration itself lasts twenty-four hours, during which the celebrants make food offerings to the local spirits (natural and ancestral), dance and make music – all these quite similar to regional cultural practices. However, they also share a communal meal among themselves, giving some of the cooked food to the spirits. They converse with these spirits during the entire day through the agency of individuals, mostly men, who enter into trance. Quite startlingly for an anthropologist expecting awe and reverence during shamanistic performances, Nayaka joke, tease and even offer cigarettes to the spirits. Referring to them as *dodavaru* ('big' parents) and to themselves as *makalu* (children), throughout the twenty-four hours, they repeatedly remind the *dodavaru* how 'you used to look after us' and 'gave us food', gradually re-establishing relatedness within this broader socio-natural sphere.

In this sociology, where kinship is informed – neither by blood ties as in Euro-American culture (see Schneider 1984) nor by moral obligations as in traditional systems (cf. Woodburn 1980: 105) – but by everyday family practices, immediacy is crucial. It is hard to maintain such relationships at a distance. To keep relations at all, one needs then to visit others frequently.<sup>8</sup> Looking again to the other local conversations, Guemple similarly concludes from his study that the Inuit organization is a 'proximal organization' (1988: 134), while Myers notes 'the tyranny of distance' (1986: 166). Myers further remarks that 'distance ... imposed itself as a constraint on the Pintupi organizational structure' (1986: 79). Conversely, however, immediacy in itself contributes considerably to the 'work' of making relationships. If nothing else, it imposes a sharing of domestic space.

This twofold spatial constraint generates two dispositions, clearly observable in everyday practical activities: first, *the less people see each other, the more they need to engage in demonstrative acts of sharing in everyday activities when they meet, in order to reiterate the sense of 'relatedness'*. For example, during the first week or two, visitors share a fireplace with their hosts and all eat from the same cooking pot. When visits lengthen, families keep separate fireplaces and each cooks and eats its own food. Secondly, *the more people regularly live adjacent to each other – within an established paradigm of relatedness – the more they are concerned in everyday life not so much with demonstrating sharing as with avoiding any act to the contrary; they demand shares, and share in response to demands.*<sup>9</sup> For example, the families mentioned above, who keep their own fireplaces and cook each for itself, do not often send food to each other of their own accord. But should one of them directly ask the other for food – verbally or by insinuation – they will share. Generally, people do not refuse requests for sharing; they strongly sanction such refusals.<sup>10</sup>

The power of immediacy is expressed in a particular Nayaka ritual – a rare ritual for the ritual-minimalist Nayaka – to which they attribute importance,

but do not explain how and why. Performing it after a death, they pour oil onto water kept in a little hollow dug into the ground near the place where the deceased last lived. As the oil reaches the surface of the water, it forms floating drops. As the drops get nearer, and then touch each other, they add and amalgamate into a greater drop. This 'adding', Nayaka told me, ensures that the spirit of the deceased will 'add onto' the *sonta* of the dead relatives in the other world. They would not say any more, but the same idea, in fact, lies bare on the ground: single-hut hamlets evince the cultural endorsement of living alone in the forest, yet in multi-hut hamlets, despite the vast space available, huts are positioned very near to each other. Like the oil-in-water metaphor, the layout seems to reflect an (ethno)sociology of autonomous families who, in order to relate at all, coalesce.

This oil-in-water sociology entails a third central disposition, expressed in a manifold way in Nayaka social practices: *the more people live adjacent to each other – letting immediacy do for them a great deal of the 'work' of relatedness (as above) – the more they cultivate what could be called a 'sharing perspective' on the world of people and things around them.* For example, as shown earlier, spouses adopt each other's usage of kinship terms in reference to people with whom they frequently interact, favouring the closest term. If my husband refers to a certain woman in our immediate environment as 'sister', I also refer to her as 'sister'; she becomes 'our sister'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, spouses share a perspective on the objects they frequently use. What belongs to one, belongs to the other, and to both of them, all at once. Nayaka insist that these options do not exclude each other, and what is more, logically follow each other. If my husband uses a knife which he had before we started living together, and I now frequently use this knife as well, it 'belongs'<sup>12</sup> to my husband, to me, and to 'us'. The 'us' and corresponding 'our' are not corporeal but aggregative notions, constituted by concurrent frequent usage of the same object, or, in the case of persons, concurrent sustained interaction with the same person – both of which are invited by immediacy.

Like spouses, with all sorts of variations pertinent to the circumstances in question, families in any *sonta* cultivate a shared perspective on the world around them.<sup>13</sup> For example, those who share a hut each regard it as their own and simultaneously as 'our'. (When I talked with Kungan and Bomi about the hut they had initially constructed for me, which we later shared, they said it was mine, Kungan's, Bomi's and ours). Similarly, families who live in the same site regard the resources around them as belonging to each of them and all together (in this aggregative sense). There are many other embodiments of this idea of 'shared perspective'; for example (to recall examples used above in other contexts): Nayaka group conversations, wherein all sit facing the same direction, sharing a perspective on the view, talking about what they all see, or have experienced; or, adults' use of common kinship terms for children and old people; or, the avoidance of gossip which is after all a partial, private perspective of some people on others.

This oil-in-water sociology, finally, implies egalitarianism. For once, individuals have common access both to potential resources and to available ones – the latter, often only effected by requests for sharing that cannot be refused (see Woodburn 1982). Furthermore – and speaking in Nayaka ‘oil-in-water’ terms – only drops made of the same stuff can amalgamate, and so equality is of the essence. It is an inevitable condition for making relationships. Moreover, since ‘society’ itself is constitutive of these relationships, equality is an *a priori* position of any person within this society.

### *Immediate social environment*

Taking account of these Nayaka voices, along with some contemporary theoretical ones, further deepens the understanding of both. Particularly relevant is Strathern’s recent article (1992), entitled ‘Parts and wholes’, in which she compares Melanesian and English (or Euro-American) ethnosociologies. Nayaka voices provide a third ethnosociology that is fruitfully comparable with Strathern’s bifocal comparison.

In the English sociology, Strathern argues, individuals are in some senses unique and autonomous (e.g., biologically, psychologically). Sociologically speaking, however, they are incomplete, and thus born are ‘socialized’ into their parts within society, which is in itself the whole. Their death, then, does not affect this whole; they are simply replaced by other persons socialized into the part. By contrast (Strathern suggests), in the Melanesian sociology persons are mutually constituted by relationships. Each one is conceived as a whole which, however, is a composite of parts, namely the relational roles in which he (or she) is involved. Born into role-relationships, Melanesian persons expand them during their life-cycle, mutually constituting their selves with a growing number of other selves. Their death affects all these others, and the entire structure has to be redressed. Compared with both systems of ‘parts and wholes’, Nayaka sociology is one of ‘wholes and wholes’. They conceive each person as a whole who *adds* onto others to constitute greater wholes. Born as wholes, persons coalesce with others, but retaining their wholeness, they can subsequently depart and again coalesce with others. Throughout their lives, they perpetually coalesce with, and depart from, each other. Their death only means departure from the living and coalescence with the supernatural.

Furthermore, English persons, Strathern argues, largely relate to others by what she calls a ‘totalizing perspective’; they see others as anonymous parts of the whole with which they are ultimately concerned. Or, in simplified words, a person is likely to say ‘my sister is a member of that group’. By contrast, Strathern continues, Melanesians relate to each other by switching perspectives. For example, a person is likely to say, ‘your sister is my wife’. By contrast with both, Nayaka relate to others by a sharing perspective. A Nayaka person may say ‘your sister is my sister’.

Strathern would be the last, I think, to deny that the constitution of selves through relationships with others – an ‘exchange perspective’ – also occurs in

some areas of the English system. Her point relates to what Wagner (1986) calls the larger frames of culture. Similarly, I would argue that the constitution of autonomous selves, who further co-constitute their selves through coalescence with variable others – a ‘sharing perspective’ – occur in some areas within both Melanesian and English systems. Appadurai (1986) has recently shown that ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ relationships are variably articulated with each other both within the predominantly ‘commodity’ system of Euro-America and the predominantly ‘gift’ system as among Melanesians. I would similarly argue that these *three* kinds of social webs are variably articulated within diverse systems. The distinction between them is nothing but the disassembly that starts off the process of understanding.

Going further back to the originating terms of the long conversation to which, in fact, Strathern responds – the ‘bread-and-butter’ conversation about ‘face-to-face’ versus anonymous relationships – Nayaka relationships are different, and – again – fruitfully comparable with both. For despite its deceptive label, ‘face-to-face’ does not refer simply to proximity between persons engaged in such a relationship. Strangers in town who talk with each other are in proximity but not in a ‘face-to-face’ relationship (even if they bump into each other and talk more than once). Instead, a crude precursor of Strathern’s ‘exchange perspective’, the ‘face-to-face’ category describes relationships through diverse roles. Nayaka persons, although they are always in proximity when they engage with each other, are *not* in ‘face-to-face’ relationships.

Nayaka relationships, I suggest, can be described as ‘immediate relationships’, adding now a phenomenological sense to the term which I have extensively used before. Critical of the vagueness of the category ‘face-to-face’, in *The structures of the life world* (1973), Schutz and Luckmann<sup>14</sup> described a continuum going from pure immediacy at the one end to pure anonymity at the other.<sup>15</sup> In ‘pure immediacy’ (they posited), a person shares common space and time with the other, experiences the other ‘in person’ not as type, and responds to the flow of the joint experience, to the ‘vivid’ presence of the other, rather than to any reflection thereof. Persons who mutually experience such immediacy (Schutz and Luckmann suggest) are in a pure ‘we relationship’. Distance erodes immediacy and ‘we relationships’, imposing itself spatially, temporally, or – this is important – through reflection. As one becomes distant from the other by time, space or objectification, the other is no longer experienced as a ‘vivid’, ‘biographic’ person. His (or her) experience is influenced by mediating structures and typificatory schemes, such as role relationships. The immediate experience turns into a mediated one, and ‘we relationships’ turn into ‘they relationships’.

I propose that through their activities and – more loudly – their silences, Nayaka ‘voice’ their preference for ‘we relationships’. Their environment, we have seen, propagates sharing space, time, joint experiences and resources. It seems to inhibit elaborations *about* how relationships are or should be and, more generally, to subdue explicit theorization of the system. For to



talk about relationships – or explicitly to theorize about a society constitutive of them – is to impose distance that erodes ‘we relationships’. Guemple’s conversations with Belcher Island Inuit have led him to the observation that

Inuit life remains relatively ‘unprincipled’, dependent largely on an everyday-life world of ongoing relations rather than on any sense of how things ought to be in a highly structured universe of abstract social rules (1988: 149).

Similarly, Myers has been led to conclude that

Pintupi did not seem interested in reflecting on their organizational categories as an abstracted object... Pintupi insisted first and foremost that I see and experience things, hesitating to present information analytically or schematically (1986: 294-5).

And (restricting his comments to societies with an immediate-return system) Woodburn states that

people often do not, at least explicitly, seem to value their own culture and institutions very highly and may, indeed, not be accustomed to formulating what their custom is or what it ought to be (1980: 106).<sup>16</sup>

A cultural preference for ‘we relationships’ may apply also to these other band cases, all of whom favour immediate interaction. *Sonta* (and probably *ila* and *walytja*), I propose, may be structures of ‘we-relationships’<sup>17</sup> culturally emphasizing a flow of joint experience, and knowledge of others in their ‘vivid’ presence. Furthermore, the cultures of sharing which are common to these peoples – sharing domestic space, everyday activities, resources, perspectives (the sexual exotica of Inuit wife-sharing comes to mind) – may at least in part be about sustaining the flow of joint experience, the mutual sense of immediacy, that keep people in a (near) we-relationship.

Finally, we come back to the emergent conversation about the diversity of sociality. To quote Carrithers again, from the passage cited earlier, sociality is

the human capacity for complex social behaviour ... a capacity, a potential ... [that] can only be realized by conception, birth, maturation, and growth in a suitable environment ... [and that] ... *may be differently expressed in different environments* (1992: 34-40, my emphasis).

With Schutz and Luckmann (1973), I suggest that this capacity ranges from ‘immediacy’ to ‘anonymity’, and along with Carrithers and Strathern, that each social environment elaborates on one or more points along this continuum. I then add that the band environment (*alias* ‘band society’, and ‘band level of socio-cultural integration’) is a social environment which specifically elaborates about the range of immediacy. It encultures people living therein to weave to *this* culturally selected pattern and quality. This is not to argue that band peoples *cannot* engage in other kinds of relationships, realizing other aspects of their (universally-human) sociality. They do; some of them even among themselves;<sup>18</sup> all of them in their dealings with other peoples. The argument is simply that they have an intra-band social environment which propagates and elaborates on that range of the spectrum of human sociality. Similarly, this is not to say that ‘immediate’ relationships and structures are not found in other societies. More likely – and an intriguing direction for further research – such relationships and structures exist in other societies, but are less conspicuous there than in band cases, because

larger frames mostly propagate and elaborate on other ranges of the sociality spectrum.

### Conclusion

'Good conversations', Gudeman and Rivera write, 'have no endings and often no beginnings. They have participants and listeners but belong to no one, nor to history' (1990: 1). This article has argued that the conversation Julian Steward started in 1936 was a potentially 'good conversation' which deserved to be continued. For many years, the conversation on 'subsistence' which replaced it has consigned hunter-gatherers to a liminal position – to the border area between animal and human realms, evolutionary and present times. It has described their social achievements in the negative, as a lack. This article invites a renewed conversation on the (human) quality of their relationships. It implies that an appreciation of this quality must inform conversations on hunter-gatherers' two-way relationships with neighbouring and Euro-American peoples. More generally, it implies that this appreciation must inform long conversations about the complexity and diversity of human sociality.

### NOTES

I am grateful to B. Bodenhorn, C. Coroneos, S. Kent, H. Donnan and an anonymous reader for comments on earlier drafts of this article, and to E. Iluz, H. Feit, E. Goody, T. Ingold, T. Luckmann, A. Kordova, G. Menahem, Y. Peres, and J. Woodburn for helpful conversations. The errors remain my own. The 1990 Berlin workshop on Social Intelligence, and the 1993 McMaster Departmental Research Seminar, provided supportive audiences for early generations of the article. A voluminous body of anthropological writings has contributed to this article; the barest minimum has been included in the bibliography, which is already large.

<sup>1</sup> See also Kent (1992; forthcoming) for discussions of diversity among foragers.

<sup>2</sup> The most serious social theorization was offered by Ingold (1986), but even he was concerned with the social relations of production, a position he has been recently changing.

<sup>3</sup> I was told that sexual activities take place in the forest.

<sup>4</sup> Other peoples live in the Gir valley, with whom the Nayaka interact (see Bird-David 1988; 1992b), but in this article I focus only on relationships among the Nayaka themselves.

<sup>5</sup> Guemple (1988: 138–40) describes a more complex practice of teaching kinship terms among Belcher Island Inuit, which nevertheless follows the same logic, but elaborates on it.

<sup>6</sup> For more details on the use of names and kinship terms, see Bird-David (1983; in press).

<sup>7</sup> My knowledge was gained from conversations with long-term close neighbours of Nayaka.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of ecological and functional explanations of this widely-discussed phenomenon among band peoples see Gardner (1991).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Nayaka 'sharing' and 'demand sharing' see also Bird-David (1990; 1992a).

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this understanding lies behind Kungan's explanation of *sonta* as persons 'who live with Nayaka, in Nayaka places, like Nayaka'. He seems to emphasize that it suffices to live together, share space and time, and generally practise acceptable manners in order to be regarded one of the *sonta*. Cf. Woodburn (1979: 257).

<sup>11</sup> This practice is sufficiently important for Nayaka to go against the logic of the regionally dominant Dravidian kinship system, from which their kinship terms derive, since they speak dialects of regional Dravidian languages, Kanada and Malayalam, which bifurcate the world into affine and consanguine.

<sup>12</sup> 'Belonging' is constituted by the regular use of an object (not by an *a priori* moral imperative) – just as 'relationships' with persons are constituted by regular shared activities. On the former, see Bird-David (1990).

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the traditional analysis of the tension between, and the complex sense of, individual and collective ownership, see Ingold (1986), Myers (1986) and Barnard & Woodburn (1988).

<sup>14</sup> The book was started by Alfred Schutz, who intended to bring together his entire work, then, upon his death, was edited and completed by Thomas Luckmann.

<sup>15</sup> Whole relationships and split-seconds of interaction can be scaled on this continuum.

<sup>16</sup> Compare similar comments in Gardner (1966) and Morris (1977).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Liberman (1985) for another usage of 'we relationships' in his ethnomethodological study of Western Desert Australian Aborigines.

<sup>18</sup> Other relationships *within* the band environment are often mediated by structures involving interaction of band peoples with the supernatural and other peoples.

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## **Socialité et relations intimes : conversations passées et présentes au sujet des bandes de chasseurs-cueilleurs**

### *Résumé*

Cet article, critique du cadre écologiste qui a dominé jusqu'à nos jours l'étude des sociétés vivant de la chasse et de la collecte, se propose de renouveler l'analyse de l'organisation sociale des chasseurs-cueilleurs. Pour cela, l'auteur choisit de ranimer la 'conversation' que Julian Steward avait engagée en 1936, et qui s'est presque éteinte trente ans plus tard au lendemain du célèbre symposium 'L'Homme Chasseur' (*Man the Hunter*). De nouvelles voix, indigènes, sont introduites dans cette conversation, non pas pour adresser les questions écologiques, mais plutôt pour participer aux débats contemporains concernant la nature du social et de sa diversité. Pour l'auteur, les relations de bande doivent être comprises comme des relations 'entre nous' caractérisées par le partage. Ces relations sont donc l'expression du 'sociétal', un concept dont la portée générale a été jusqu'ici trop négligée.

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